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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS: CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR INTERCULTURAL BIBLE READING[1]

PART I

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Abstract

Theoretically the process of intercultural Bible reading should create a safe space where the voice of the individual can be heard in community with others. It should be a space where the individual is not only free to speak but also to have the innate experience of truly being heard. In this respect the intercultural Bible reading experience becomes a space that promotes human dignity and has the inherent capacity to facilitate social transformation. Although these Bible study groups can ideally be a safe space with the potential for social transformation, the practical reality shows a more complicated dynamic. Two important factors that contribute to the complexity are the ideological framework of individual participants and the underlying power dynamic in the social interaction. To bring the concepts of power and ideology in intercultural Bible reading into focus, an empirical study was conducted. My two part paper will discuss this qualitative research project that took place in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. In the culturally diverse study, groups of women engaged with one another in a discussion of the biblical text in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 which describes the rape of Tamar. Part I of my contribution functions as the theoretical backbone to the empirical exploration that will be discussed in Part II.

Key Words: Intercultural Bible Reading, Power, Ideology

Introduction

When engaging with concepts such as power, ideology and culture, it is very easy to become stuck in the pages of a textbook or to get lost in complex theory. Although the empirical study that I conducted was interested in all the abovementioned concepts and was constructed in such a way as to illuminate these concepts, it was not in the first place a theoretical exercise. The focus was rather on creating a safe space where real flesh and blood Bible readers could meet one another, engage with one another and enter into a process that would hopefully facilitate change. The women who took part in the study represented in a unique way the cultural diversity of the Eastern Cape Province where the study was conducted. Culturally and historically it is a rich landscape, but the realities that face modern inhabitants are often dire. Lack of educational resources, poverty, violence and crime is a heartbreaking reality of many living in the Eastern Cape. The significance of

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conducting the study in the Eastern Cape became clear in the process of developing the research project. In the year 2009 shocking statistics gave an indication of the extent of sexual violence in the Eastern Cape when it was reported in 'n local newspaper that one out of every three Xhosa-speaking males admitted to having committed acts of sexual violence against women. South Africa is a country where exceptionally high incidences of rape and sexually based violence have been recorded, where very few cases are reported and even fewer have been brought to justice.[2] For the sake of this study it was therefore important to create a safe space where women could talk to women, where the voice of a sister who lived through the same reality more than 2000 years ago could be heard clearly and where new hope could be born. Over and above the painful reality of sexual violence, the landscape also provided the background for conflict and strife through the course of history[3]. The Dutch Reformed Church's involvement with the Apartheid regime was also cemented in a decision taken by the Circuit of Sondags River in the Eastern Cape. According to the decision 'lesser brothers' were denied access to the Communion table. This decision resulted in a split within the Dutch Reformed Church into churches for White, Coloured and Black people respectively. This broken and troubled landscape forms the backdrop against which the research must be understood.

A Space Imagined

The intercultural Bible reading space that was imagined, constructed, problematised and evaluated in this study was based on the combined hermeneutical framework of Feminism and African hermeneutics.

Ruether (2002:3) describes Feminism as "a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary". Ackermann (1993:24) elaborates by defining the term as: "The commitment to the praxis of liberation for women from all that oppresses us. Feminism does not benefit any specific group, race or class of women; neither does it promote privilege for women over men. It is about a different consciousness, a radically transformed perspective which questions our social, cultural, political and religious traditions and calls for structural change in all these spheres." Ackermann (2006:226) further defines the implications for the fight for justice by saying: "Feminist theology in my context takes all women's experiences of oppression and discrimination very seriously, and it extends its concern to include all people who find themselves on the margins of our society and who know the violating effects of discrimination, either on grounds of gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, disease or whatever, by remaining continually vigilant about the nature of the interlocking of systems of domination and contribute to such oppression." Feminism as hermeneutical tool is skillfully described by Oduyoye (1986:121): "Feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women's experiences should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of being a human. It highlights the woman's world and her worldview as she struggles side by side with the man to realise her full potential as a human being…

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2 For a detailed discussion of the endemic nature of sexual violence in South Africa see Jewkes, R 2002. Intimate partner violence: cause and prevention. *The Lancet,* 359:1423-1429. Jewkes, R & Abrahams, N 2002. The epidemiology of rape and sexual coercion in South Africa: an overview. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55:1231-1244. Jewkes, R, Levin, J & Penn-Kekana, L 2002. Risk factors for domestic violence: findings from a South African cross-sectional study. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55:1603-1617.

3 The Xhosa Wars, also known as the Cape Frontier Wars, were a series of nine wars between the Xhosa people and the European settlers, from 1799 to 1879.

Feminism then emphasises the wholeness of the community as made up of male and female beings. It seeks to express what is not so obvious, that is that male-humanity is a part with female-humanity, and that both expressions of humanity are needed to shape a balanced community within which each will experience a fullness of being. Feminism calls for the incorporation of the woman into the community of interpretation of what it means to be human." Although there is no complete or absolute list of properties of a so-called Feminist hermeneutic, the following can be deducted from the abovementioned definitions:

- Women are completely and fully human and should be treated accordingly.
- Women hold a unique experiential position that is contextually based.
- From this follows two related principles, namely: "Firstly, the principle of equality (women and men are fully equal and should be treated as such) and secondly, the principle of mutuality (humans are viewed as embodied subjects, essentially related and essentially free)" (Farley 1985:45).

Feminist theory has important implications for Biblical hermeneutics. The unique individual interpretation position of Bible readers which develops within a specific social context is taken seriously by Feminist scholars and forms the basis of the hermeneutic process. An inclusive space that allows for diversity is desired. Feminist hermeneutics encourages a safe space that allows for the unique voice of the contextually based individual to be heard. By creating this space new ways of interpretation are encouraged, therefore allowing for new journeys to be taken through old Biblical landscapes.[4]

Where Feminism encourages the individual to speak out from her/his particular social context, African hermeneutics[5] emphasises the importance of a communal space where the voice of the individual can be heard. The space that African hermeneutics describes, allows for the transformation from a situation of multi-culturality to inter-culturality, where the differences between various cultural agents are not merely tolerated but rather celebrated and where they are brought into real interaction. African hermeneutics thus asks for an ethic of hospitality "The challenge posed by the moral crisis does not merely ask for tolerance and peaceful co-existence or some abstract plea for community, but for an ethos of hospitality. The opposite of cruelty and hostility is not simply freedom from the cruel and hostile relationship, but hospitality. Without an ethos of hospitality it is difficult to envisage a way to challenge economic injustice, racism and xenophobia, lack of communication, the

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4 I am indebted to the work of Serene Jones for the metaphor. She describes the task of feminist theology as similar to that of a cartographer. "The cartographical metaphor makes clear feminist theory is concerned not so much to reconstruct the terrain of faith as to provide markers for travelling through the terrain in new ways" (Jones 2000:19)

5 The term African hermeneutics does not imply a singular all-encompassing movement or approach to theological issues. Africa is fragmented and approaches to theological issues are numerous. Pluralism is of course not unique to Africa but rather typical of a post-modern reality, a reality that challenges the universalisation of human experience. "Resistance to this universalising and imperialist tendency, therefore, means an assertion of the radically, irreducibly plural nature of human existence. It implies a fundamental respect for the Other, one that does not and will not attempt to reduce the Other to the Same. Life is basically dialogical, like a good conversation. It is a relation that retains its distance; it is a face-to-face engagement that respects the 'otherness of the other'; it is committed to hearing the voice of the other. Pluralism, thus, is a given fact of political, cultural, theological and religious life" (Peterson 1994:223). African hermeneutics takes diversity seriously and does not stirve towards the creation of a new approach to Biblical interpretation, but as Jonker (2005:637) rightly states: "An African hermeneutic is rather a hermeneutical stance or disposition according to which, and in service of which, a whole variety of exegetical methods or tools are used".

recognition of the rights of another, etc. Hospitality is a prerequisite for a more public life" (Vosloo 2003:66).

The intercultural Bible reading space develops out of the combined hermeneutical viewpoints of Feminism and African hermeneutics. The space imagined is one where the individual feels safe and protected enough to share their unique socially constructed reality in the midst of the so called 'other'. In this space the individual is free to speak and also has the innate experience of truly being heard. Human dignity is promoted by this experience and the possibility for social transformation exists.

Problematising a Space

In order to critically engage with the abovementioned theoretical intercultural space, an empirical study was conducted. Real flesh and blood Bible readers from a diversity of cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds encountered each other in an intercultural Bible reading environment. Although these Bible study groups, as mentioned above, can ideally be a safe space with the potential for social transformation, the practical reality shows a more complicated dynamic. Two important factors that contribute to the complexity are the ideological framework of individual participants and the underlying power dynamic in the social interaction. Definitions of culture, ideology and power were explored that could adequately deal with the hybrid and dynamic nature of the intercultural Bible reading space.

Cultural definitions have become more dynamic in the last couple of decades[6]. In line with this shift, Hofstede (2001:153) defines culture as: "...the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." Hofstede distinguishes between three levels of cultural cognition, namely the universal[7], the collective[8] and the individual[9] that is manifested in values and practices that becomes visible in symbols, heroes and cultural rituals. "Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, and objects that carry often complex meanings recognised as such only by those who share the culture. Heroes are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary that possesses characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior. Rituals are

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6 The focus of Geertz (1975:1-33) on a so-called 'think description of culture' contributed substantially to a more dynamic definition of culture where the complex realities of a cultural system were brought into play. Geertz states: "Cultural analysis is guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape." The goal of cultural analysis according to Geertz is to bring into focus the complexity of human behaviour and in the process we are confronted by 'a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which we must contrive somehow, first to grasp and then to render." Geertz explains the complexities of cultural studies by means of a metaphor when he says that the study of culture is like "trying to read a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, supercilious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written, not in conventionalised graphs of sounds, but in transient examples of shaped behavior." The goal of cultural studies is thus not fundamentally to find one all-encompassing definition of culture but rather to explain the complexity of the dimensions of culture.

7 Hofstede (2001:2) describes this dimension as follows: "The least unique but most basic is the universal level of metal programming that is shared by all, or almost all, humankind. This is the biological 'operating system' of the human body…"

8 The collective dimension of cultural cognition describes: "the mental programming that is common to people belonging to a certain group or category, but different from people belonging to other groups or categories. The whole area of subjective human culture belongs to this level" (Hofstede 2001:2).

9 Individual cultural cognition is inique to individuals: "no two people are programmed exactly alike… This is the level of individual personality, and it provides for a wide range of alternative behaviours within the same collective culture" (Hofstede 2001:2).

collective activities that are technically unnecessary to the achievement of desired ends, but that within a culture are considered socially essential, keeping the individual bound within the norms of the collectivity. Rituals are therefore carried out for their own sake" (Hofstede 2001:10). In order to study the complexities of culture, Hofstede identifies: "…five independent dimensions of national culture differences, each rooted in a basic problem with which all societies have to cope: (1) Power distance, which is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality; (2) Uncertainty avoidance, which is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future; (3) Individualism *vs.* collectivism, which is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups; (4) Masculinity versus femininity, which is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women and (5) Long term versus short term orientation, which is related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present" (Hofstede 2001:29).

Individuals that join the intercultural reading space are not only culturally imbedded, but also have ideological investments.[10] Ideology is a complex term that can be defined in a variety of ways depending on the context in which it functions.[11] Thomson chooses for a critical definition of ideology: "The analysis of ideology, according to the conception which I propose, is primarily concerned with the ways in which symbolic forms intersect with relations of power. It is concerned with the ways in which meaning is mobilised in the social world and serves thereby to bolster up individuals and groups who occupy positions of power… To study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning serves to establish and sustain relations of domination"[12] (Thomson 1990:56). To study ideology thus implies the analysis of symbolic forms within specific contexts and the power consequences of the use of these symbolic forms. Thomson (1990:59) describes symbolic forms as follows: "By 'symbolic forms' I understand a broad range of actions and utterances, images and texts, which are produced by subjects and recognised by them and others as meaningful constructs." These symbolic forms are always contextually imbedded and induce a power dynamic that is the primary focus of ideology criticism. "Individuals situated within socially structured contexts have, by virtue of their location, different quantities of, and different degrees of access to, available resources. The social location of individuals, and the entitlements associated with their position in a social field or institutions endow them

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10 "Readers, too, have ideological investments – in what they choose to read, how they incorporate or fail to incorporate what they read into their own structure of opinion, how they report on what they have read and how they recommend or insist to others that they read the same works" (Clines 1995:24).

11 "Broadly speaking, one can distinguish neutral or even positive uses and negative, also called pejorative, uses of the concept. When it is used in a neutral or positive way it becomes a kind of synonym for the whole network of ideas, the philosophy, the vision, that all-encompassing view of life that people have and must have in order to be able to live, to construct meaning and purpose… When it is, however, used in a negative or pejorative way, it usually forms part of ideology-critique, of an attempt to unmask, to criticise and if possible to transform and replace particular ideologies" (Smit 1991:280). Clines (1995:10-11) distinguishes the following definitions of the term: "Ideology can mean (1) a more or less connected group of ideas, (2) a relatively coherent set of ideas amounting to a world-view, or outlook on life, (3) a set of such ideas special to a particular social class or group, (4) the set of ideas held by the dominant group in a society. Among the connotations of the term ideology are the following: (1) ideas that are shared with others; (2) ideas serving the interest of a particular group, especially a dominant group; (3) ideas that are wrongly passed off as natural, obvious or common-sense; (4) ideas that are assumed rather than argued for; (5) ideas that are often unexpressed and unrecognised by those who hold them; (6) ideas oriented toward action, ideas controlling or influencing actions; (7) a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence…"

12 Smit (2007:293) remarks in his discussion of Thomson's theory that: "Domination is, of course, a very ambivalent term in itself, so that it must be seen here in a very broad, general way, to include different forms of the exercise of social power, propaganda, intimidation, indoctrination, false information, and so forth."

with varying degrees of power…We can speak of 'domination' when established relations of power are 'systematically asymmetrical', that is, when particular agents or groups of agents are endowed with power in a durable way which excludes, and to some significant degree remains inaccessible to other agents or groups of agents, irrespective of the basis upon which such exclusion is carried out' (Thomson 1990:59). Thomson gives special attention to linguistic utterances, whether written or spoken. Language and words are key symbolic forms. Smit (2007:293) remarks in this regard: "The difference is that analysts have become more aware of the fact that ideas do not exist as separate entities somewhere in the sky, but that they are existing-in-language. For that reason attention has been focused on the ways in which language functions ideologically. The use of language is not a neutral activity, but an essential part of human actions, of human behavior in general, and therefore also of human relations of power." Pauw (2007:32) continues this line of thinking: "Human beings give meaning to their lives and the lives of others through symbolic forms – linguistic and non-linguistic expressions or utterances, meaningful actions, texts, images and objects that come to symbolise (or to 'mean') something. These forms are communicated to others in an attempt to share their ideas, beliefs and experiences." Thomson suggests an in-depth hermeneutic[13] for the study of symbolic forms within a specific social context. Language embedded in specific social contexts becomes the focus of the ideological critique.

In terms of the empirical study conducted with intercultural Bible reading groups the relevance of both Hofstede and Thomson's' theories are clear. Both theories allow for a hybrid, complex dynamic to function. It is non-radactionalist, but rather strives for a depth hermeneutic that brings all levels of complexities to the fore. Both theories take language as a symbolic form seriously and understand the social embeddedness of words. To study culture and ideology in an intercultural Bible reading environment thus implies the study of language in a specific social environment and the power implications that it implies.

It is already clear from the discussion above that the use of language in a specific social context has power implication. To more adequately engage with the power dynamic that functions in the intercultural Bible reading space the extensive work of Michael Foucault on the subject was critically applied. Foucault states "...that one should never try to understand power divorced from the context in which it shows itself" (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:40). Power is always relational and should be studied accordingly: "The concept of power is an epistemological error; one individual cannot hold unilateral power over another, because people are always subject to the constraints of relationships" (Flaskas & Humphreys 1993:36). George (2000:92) remarks with regard to Foucault's theory on power: "When Foucault discusses power, he does not mean by this idea a fixed quantitative or physical force, something innately possessed or held by individuals or institutions. He acknowledges that power often is channelled through people or institutions, but this is not due to the inherent 'power' of such people or institutions. Rather, Foucault understands power as a force, something present throughout the world and in all people. Power is

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[13] The in-depth hermeneutic that Thomson (1990:284-291) suggests consists of three phases, namely to: "1)…reconstruct the social and historical conditions of the production, circulation and reception of symbolic forms, to examine the rules and conventions, the social relations and institutions, and the distribution of power, resources and opportunities by virtue of which these contexts form differentiated and socially structured fields. 2) Discursive analysis, that is, the analysis of the structural features and relations of discourse. I am using the term 'discourse' in a general way to refer to actually occurring instances for communication. Hence the object of discursive analysis is not some well-honed example designed to test our linguistic institutions, but rather actual instances of everyday communications. 3) The process of interpretation/re-interpretation".

therefore something distinct from authority. Everyone has power, whether they exercise that power individually, in groups or through institutions."

In short Foucault's theory on power can be described as follows:

- Power does not reside in an institution or structures[14], but is rather a complex strategy.
- Power always functions in such a way as to create more power: "Power, whether individual or institutional, always seeks to become more powerful and influential in society, and thus there is constant interaction, negotiation, and competition among forces. Frequently, forces combine in particular, complex arrangement or configuration in order to achieve more power" (George 2000:93).
- Where there is power there is resistance: "There are no relations of power without resistances; that the latter are all the more real and effective to the extent that they are formed there where the relations of power are exercised, resistance to power doesn't have to come from elsewhere in order to be real, nor is it trapped because it is the compatriot of power. It exist all the more insofar as it is there where power is; it is therefore like power, multiple and integratable into global stratagies" (Foucault 1980b:142).
- Power is not always negative: "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply that fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pressure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression " (Foucault 1980a:119).

Foucault describes his theory on power as follows: "It seems to me that power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it… I would suggest: (i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role; (iii) that these relations don't take the sole form of prohibition and punishment, but are of multiple form; (iv) that their interconnection delineate general conditions of domination, and this domination is organised into a more-or-less coherent and unitary strategic form; that dispersed, heteromorphous, localised procedures of power are adapted, re-inforced and transformed by these global strategies, all this being accompanied by numerous phenomena of inertia, displacement and resistance; hence one should not assume a massive and primal condition of domination, a binary structure with 'dominators' on the one side and 'dominated' on the other, but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially susceptible of integration into overall strategies; (v) that power relations do indeed 'serve', but not all because they are 'in service of' an economic interest taken as primary, rather because they are capable of being utilised in strategies; (vi) that there are no relations of power without resistances, that the latter are all the more real

[14] Social institutions such as banks, the police, schools, medical institutions and professional organisations often do exercise power, but Foucault means it is not some kind of inherent quality of these institutions but rather the result of a specific set of circumstances or historical situations. "Because specific circumstances and conditions make these institutions possible, a change in those circumstances threatens, if not outright negates, the ability of these institutions to continue to exercise their power and to exist in the same way" (George 2000:93).

and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised…" (Foucault 1980b:142).

Taking into account the cultural theory of Hofstede, the ideological theory of Thomson and Foucault's theory on power, the theoretical intercultural Bible reading process was problematised and analysed by focusing on two independent but closely related questions. Firstly, the question of the power dynamic that functions in the intercultural Bible reading process, namely: What are the power structures that can be identified and analysed in the intercultural reading space? The second question functions on the ideological plain: Does the ideological framework of individual participants get challenged when confronted by the culturally diverse other, on the one level, but also the biblical text that functions within a particular ideological context? The empirical study was envisioned and set up in such a way as to firstly create the safe intercultural space that Feminism and African hermeneutics theorise about, but secondly in such a way as to shed as much as possible light on the abovementioned research questions.

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